

The John Chafee Foster Care Independence Act
North Carolina LINKS Report, Plan and Application for Funding 2004-2009

NC LINKS VISION

Preparing today's youth for their journey that lies ahead. Opening one's eyes to see the true beauty within by teaching the morals of self love and the significance of education, never hindering their dreams, by providing the resources they need to overcome all obstacles that stubbornly stand between them and their dreams.

Rosalinda T., LINKS Advisory Board

MISSION STATEMENT

The NC LINKS Program shall provide relevant, youth-driven, outcome-based services and resources to youth and young adults who are or were in foster care as teens so that they can increase their capacity to become successful, independent adults.

NC LINKS Program

The purpose of the North Carolina LINKS program is to help youth in foster care to achieve positive outcomes in their transition to self-sufficiency. The activities and resources of the NC LINKS Program are built upon the foundation of helping youth achieve these outcomes as adults:

1. they will have sufficient income to meet their needs;
2. they will have a safe and stable place to live;
3. they will have strong, supportive connections with at least 5 responsible adults in addition to the helping professionals who care about them;
4. they will avoid high risk behaviors;
5. they will postpone pregnancy until they are emotionally and financially prepared to parent;
6. they will have viable access to health, mental health, and dental care; and
7. they will achieve the highest level of educational and vocational training needed to prepare them for interesting, stable and meaningful employment.

Each of the 100 North Carolina Counties is required to make available relevant, outcome-directed services to teens in care ages 16-20 and to young adults who aged out of foster care. Services include but are not limited to:

- Educational support services, including tutoring, for secondary school students;
- Financial assistance with post-secondary educational or vocational training as needed;
- The opportunity to voluntarily remain in a foster care placement on a Contractual Agreement for Residential Services (CARS) or to return to foster placement as a young adult in order to continue educational or vocational training;
- Information about and referral to community resources;
- Assistance with applying for DSS benefits, including Medicaid, Food Stamps, or Work First services;
- Assistance with employment preparation and support;
- Teaching skills needed in daily living, including money management, self care, and household management skills;
- Assistance in finding a safe and stable place to live after discharge, including helping the youth to develop alternative discharge plans;
- Assistance in defining and strengthening relationships with caring responsible adults;
- Substance and alcohol abuse education and referral for services as indicated;

- Abstinence and sex education training
- Transitional services to youth in county custody who are in the juvenile justice system; and
- Appropriate services to youth who are emotionally or academically delayed.

In order to receive LINKS services, the youth or young adult must participate in planning services and be willing to demonstrate his or her willingness to handle responsibility in resolving problems and overcoming barriers.

North Carolina recognizes that youth in the foster care system are at increased risk of homelessness. Local county LINKS programs will be expected to incorporate information into their training for youth that includes avoidance of homelessness, developing personal resources including backup discharge plans, community resource options for homeless persons, and where to turn for help.

NC Education Training Voucher Program (ETV)

The purpose of the Education Training Voucher Program is to provide resources to eligible young adults to apply toward the cost of attendance at post-secondary vocational/educational institutions. North Carolina contracts with Orphan Foundation of America to process applications for the funds, to assure that funds are not supplanting other available funds, to distribute funds for allowable costs, and to provide weekly accounting of funds spent.

Anecdotal information indicates an increase in the level of interest among LINKS youth to attend college, as well as a broader sense of future possibilities. Youth who thought they could only receive funding to attend a two-year college are now viewing four-year colleges as a viable option. Many counties are reporting significantly increased graduation rates, though the high school completion rate (43%) is still far below the state average (63%), which is one of the lowest rates in the nation.

North Carolina was approved for funding through the Education and Training Voucher Program effective October 1, 2003. In compliance with program instructions, the state used some of its Chafee Funds to provide limited Education Training Vouchers to students who were in college, including a few who were twenty years of age and would have otherwise lost eligibility for the new funding program on their 21st birthdays.

In the late summer of 2003, North Carolina initiated a contract with Orphan Foundation of America to administrate the ETV program. OFA agreed to

- Conduct outreach to locate eligible young adults
- Develop a web-based application and referral procedure (see www.statevoucher.org)
- Review and process all applications
- Track and monitor student progress
- Provide information to North Carolina on student status
- Disburse ETV funds
- Account for all expenditures
- Assure that no student receives more than \$5000 from ETV toward allowable costs of attendance and that these funds do not supplant other Federal grants;
- Enroll all students in the Care Package Program and make e-mentors available to interested students; and
- Track and report in-kind match to draw down the administrative portion of the grant.

The contract was approved and began October 1, 2003. Between November 2003 and the end of March, 2004 121 referrals and 119 applications were received. A total of \$201,149 in ETV funds was disbursed on behalf of 72 recipients by April 2, 2004, with most of the other applications in process. Information and flyers about the ETV program were mailed to county DSS LINKS coordinators and to other organizations including the North Carolina Association of Financial Advisors, the NC Counselor's Association and the NC Foster Parent Association.

Eligibility for the ETV mirrors Section 477(i) of the John Chafee Foster Care Independence Act:

- The young adult must have aged out of foster care or have been adopted from foster care after his/her 16th birthday (the date of the finalization of the adoption).
- The young adult must be 18, 19, or 20 years of age to enter the ETV program. Young adults who were participating in the program on their 21st birthdays may remain eligible until their 23rd birthday, so long as they are making satisfactory progress in school.
- The young adult must be registered and participating student in a qualifying post secondary institution of higher learning or vocational training school, or be accepted for enrollment for the next term. A student may attend full or half time and still qualify for assistance.
- The young adult must be a U.S. citizen or qualifying alien; and
- The young adult may not have more than \$10,000 in personal reserves.

North Carolina is working with OFA to use the data base in order to help youth attending the same college or university to have the option to know of each other's presence. We hope that this networking of students in similar circumstances will help to combat some of the loneliness experienced by college students generally, and by these students particularly.

In addition to ETV, the LINKS Scholarship Fund continues to be a significant resource for young adults who do not qualify for the ETV funds, for students whose needs for assistance do not qualify as a cost of attendance and for students who are attending non-qualifying vocational programs.

North Carolina's plan to design, conduct or strengthen purposes to achieve transition to self sufficiency

Develop and adopt minimal standards for county LINKS services that will assure reasonable consistency.

With a county administered, state-supervised social services delivery system, North Carolina has been reluctant to establish specific requirements for LINKS programs. Over the past several years, counties have asked for more direction and clarity about what is required. The LINKS Advisory Committee has agreed to work with the State coordinator to recommend standards and specific components of these services. The County Directors' Association will be asked to provide additional representatives for this work. Once recommended standards are developed, the association will be asked to pilot the standards to determine the fiscal impact and to make further recommendations.

Develop training for foster parents and other caregivers to teach how to help children of all ages develop skills for independence.

- North Carolina will strengthen its program of training for foster parents and others who provide care for children in foster care by developing and implementing curricula encouraging appropriate independence in children of all ages, such as decision-making skills, money management, household chores, health maintenance, time management and other skills needed for successful adulthood. This training will include an additional three hour curriculum for persons training to be foster parents. Advisory group members will work with the state coordinator to make recommendations about the curriculum.
- Our primary contract trainer, ILR, Inc. has developed training and a Training of Trainers curriculum for foster parents, with the result that each trained foster parent is teaching other foster parents in their geographic area. This TOT training has been provided for 147 individual foster parents and has resulted in their training more than a thousand other foster parents in their regions.
- The State LINKS Coordinator will collaborate with the Division's staff development unit to help assure that basic training for social workers incorporates IL services to adolescents, using positive youth development concepts.
- The LINKS coordinator provides training to designated LINKS staff and private providers on an as-needed basis. Regional LINKS training by the coordinator will be offered regularly beginning in 2005. This training will also serve the purpose of strengthening regional identity and support among the county LINKS social workers.
- The State LINKS Coordinator, one of the County LINKS liaisons and one of the DSS staff trainers participated in the training of trainers for the SEN-UNC curriculum on youth development, Interdependent Living. Twenty-five additional county and private staff were trained on delivery of this curriculum in February 2004. We hope to support continuation of this training, and to utilize the curriculum in ways that best meet the needs of staff and foster parents.
- The statewide training newsletter, Fostering Perspectives, addresses issues related to quality care to all children that will encourage normal development.

Encourage county implementation of structured independent living program for youth in foster care ages 13-15.

Data from the county survey of FFY 2003 services indicate that 85% of the counties that have eligible youth ages 13-15 are providing services to at least some of the youth within this age range. However, only 54% of eligible youth in this category are receiving LINKS services. The LINKS Advisory Committee will assist in the development of recommendations regarding LINKS services for this age group.

ILR, Inc. conducts two regional LINK-UP conferences for youth 13-15. Participants are involved in workshops and activities that are designed to address the interests of these youth.

North Carolina will continue to require individualized, youth-directed independent living services for youth in custody or on CARS agreements who are 16-21 years of age.

In order to receive funding from the Chafee program each county must agree to provide essential services to youth ages 16-18 who are in foster care. Each county plan requires that agencies specify how these services will be delivered. Data from the county survey indicate that 83% of adolescents and young adults in this age group are receiving LINKS services. According to survey reports, most of the rest have refused LINKS services, do not need the services, have run away, or are not able to access services because of incarceration, hospitalization, or incapacity.

North Carolina will continue to require that counties conduct proactive, diligent and persistent efforts to locate young adults 18 to 21 who aged out of care. Counties are strongly encouraged to provide services to young adults ages 18 to 21 who were discharged prior to age 18 but need additional LINKS services.

North Carolina has between 450 and 500 young adults who age out of foster care each year. Each calendar quarter a list of young adults who aged out of custody is sent to each custodial DSS in order to assure that counties follow up and offer appropriate services.

The LINKS liaison or designated staff will work with these young adults to assess their current situation, to develop plans if needed and desired by the young adult, and to agree upon the responsibilities of both the agency and the young adult to resolve identified barriers to self-sufficiency.

North Carolina will clarify that county Directors are expected to assure that basic LINKS services will continue in the event that the designated LINKS liaison is away from the agency for an extended period.

Standards will be developed that outline minimum required services for mandated service populations in all counties.

The LINKS Advisory Committee has agreed to continue working with the state coordinator to make recommendations regarding these standards.

Encourage counties to dedicate positions or portions of positions to assure the delivery of Independent Living Services and other services to foster teens.

- Counties with 9 or more youth in the mandatory service population (16+ in DSS custody plus youth who aged out of foster care) receive salary supplements to help pay for worker time in serving this population. While these supplements only defray the cost of a worker, they do help to assure that workers are provided the time to assure the delivery of LINKS independent living services. In the great majority of counties, there are insufficient numbers in the service population to justify assigning full-time staff. In the six most populous counties (Mecklenburg, Cumberland, Wake, New Hanover, Guilford, Forsyth) there are full-time staff assigned, and some smaller counties also have workers assigned full time. All counties are required to have a designated staff person who will assure that LINKS services are provided.

Help youth receive the education, training and services necessary to obtain employment.

- LINKS Scholarship funds of up to \$750 per year are available to help youth and young adults to help pay for school and to address academic deficits that may be interfering with the youth achieving their academic goals.
- Young adults who age out of foster care or who are adopted after their 16th birthday are eligible for Education Training Vouchers, which apply toward the cost of post-secondary education.
- North Carolina has a strong community college network of 57 institutions which offer not only one- or two-year degree/certificate programs but also adult high school diplomas, GED and college transfer courses. Counties are strongly encouraged to expose youth to the community colleges and colleges in their area as a part of their ongoing services.
- Counties will be connected to job support and training programs such as in-school work programs, Job Corps and the Workforce Investment Act Regional Youth Services. The LINKS program will also include emphasis on job readiness and job maintenance skills such as time management, use of ESC and other job information sources, interviewing skills, conflict management, and positive work attitudes. Foster parents and other caregivers will be encouraged to assist youth to experience part time employment while in school as well as summer work, and to provide coaching on job-related needs.
- Job Corps and Tarheel Challenge have been excellent resources for some older teens who want to gain job skills while completing the requirements for their GED.
- Vocational Rehabilitation provides excellent training resources for teens and young adults who need rehabilitation or adaptive training in order to secure employment.
- Students who have certain developmental delays qualify for additional services through the public school program. The LINKS Advisory Committee is seeking approval through the Department of Public Instruction to require Personal Education Plans for all youth in foster care who do not qualify for an IEP but who have academic delays due to the impact of foster care.
- LINKS Scholarship funds are also available to younger teens 13-15 as well as to older youth and young adults for any purpose that is educational in nature or which helps youth to remain in and succeed in school. Funds may be used for intensive tutoring, incentives for improved performance, educational trips, drivers' license fees, SAT fees, fees and costs associated with school-sponsored activities, etc.

County LINKS programs will be encouraged to connect with community partners to seek grants, private benefactors and existing work support programs to work with businesses to create short term apprenticeships and temporary work experiences for youth. LINKS funds may also be used to support these efforts.

Providing personal and emotional support to youth through mentors and the promotion of interaction with dedicated adults.

One of North Carolina's stated outcome goals is that each youth will have a sense of connectedness, and specifically that he or she will have at least five persons in his or her personal support network in addition to those in the child welfare or professional helping system.

- Assessing resources with individual youth

The first step in determining the youth's existing support system is to ask the youth about the "family" they have created for themselves beyond their biological family. Many counties use genograms and ecomaps to help youth to think about the supports that exist, as well as to clarify the need for developing other supports. Significant adults are contacted by the youth and/or agency (with the youth's permission) to determine their interest in increasing contact with the youth. Many of these adults had no idea that the youth identified them as significant supports, and respond very positively to the information. LINKS Special Funds have been used to help youth re-establish contact with relatives or others who live some distance away.

- Recruiting volunteers

Mentors are sought from civic organizations and faith groups as well as structured mentoring programs such as Big Brother/Big Sister. The Orphan Foundation contract to manage the ETV program includes an e-mentoring arrangement for interested students, in which students are paired with screened adults who have similar interests. ILR, Inc., our primary program contractor who works with the youth board, SaySo, is working with current and former foster youth to model and mentor for younger teens in care. We plan to use some Chafee funds to extend this program during 2004-05.

- Involving youth in volunteer activities

Volunteering is a critical component of the LINKS program. We find that youth who volunteer in community service projects have an opportunity to meet and get to know responsible adults who are involved in the same projects, as well as to develop work skills and to realize their own worth. Volunteer experiences help to build resumes and give youth an opportunity to expand their horizons about their life work.

SaySo, the statewide youth board of current and former foster youth, is planning a statewide effort to solicit, collect and distribute suitcases to teens in care for the October "Make a Difference Day". This project will involve a number of activities that will place these youth in a position to be seen for resources that they are, and we anticipate a very positive response from the communities in which they live.

This summer (2004) 9 youth from local SaySo chapters will be serving as legislative and gubernatorial pages for a week. Legislators from their home districts are serving as sponsors. These youth will be in a position to offer first hand experiences from the foster care system to help mold pending legislation.

Financial, housing, employment, and educational support for former foster care recipients age 18-21.

Financial:

- North Carolina has established a separate funding resource using both Trust Funds and Chafee Funds to assist young adults with the costs of being on their own. All young adults who are LINKS eligible may receive limited financial assistance for

costs such as education or vocational training, furniture, work clothing, car repair, bus passes, etc. Young adults who are considered to be at high risk of failing to make a successful transition to self sufficiency are eligible for additional funds for goods or services that are likely to reduce that risk.

Housing

- All young adults who age out of foster care are eligible for Transitional Housing Funds and Education Training Vouchers as well as other services that will help them to overcome barriers to self-sufficiency. We require that young adults who request help do their part in overcoming their barriers. We find that many of these young adults have to learn from difficult life experiences for a while before they are ready to accept help to handle their responsibilities. 89% of the young adults who aged out in FFY 2003 were contacted successfully; of those, 75% accepted further services. 284 young adults who did not age out were also provided LINKS services during FFY 2003, with the exception of financial assistance with housing.

The availability of up to \$1000 in Transitional Housing Funds allows young adults to rent a home in their area of choice. We intend to seek approval during the 2005 legislative long session to allow the use of State Foster Home funds to support transitional housing for youth participating in voluntary placement agreements. We envision apartments, rental homes, and boarding arrangements in private homes that would be supervised off site, with 24-hour availability of supportive services. We believe that this will provide more appropriate living arrangements for these students while freeing existing licensed foster home resources for younger teens. LINKS Transitional Housing funds may be used to supplement state and county dollars for rent if needed.

- County Departments of Social Services are encouraged to access other housing resources, such as Section 8 vouchers to help these young adults to be in safe, affordable housing. Counties are encouraged to enter public/private partnerships to provide other transitional housing resources such as scattered site apartments, supervised apartments, host homes or mentor homes, or group homes specifically designed to equip youth to build competence in their skills for independence.

North Carolina law currently allows state foster care funds to be used to help pay the cost of care for young adults ages 18-21 who re-enter care on a voluntary placement agreement (CARS) if the agency agrees and if the young person is engaged in a full-time educational or vocational program. Current law requires that placements must be in a licensed foster care facility. We are discussing the possibility of introducing a special provision in the long session of the legislature (2005) that will allow the use of state foster care funds to pay at the current board rate for off-site supervised living arrangements. This arrangement would be piloted for a period of two years for a maximum of 50 students. We hope that this project will show the efficacy of using less structured living arrangements for adult students, while freeing needed resources for younger teens in care.

Employment:

Transitional services to discharged young adults include services such as

- Talking with the young adults to assess their status, their strengths, and their needs;

- Helping young adults to become re-engaged with their families, other kin, and friends, providing assistance with planning for and handling any problems associated with that re-involvement;
- Helping young adults to overcome problems related to employability, including lack of job training, attitude, conflict management, time management and prioritization;
- Strengthening life skills such as daily living skills, communication, healthy life styles, decision making, and responsible citizenship; and
- Helping young adults to learn about resources they may need and for which they are eligible, including medical and dental care, education, job training and placement assistance, legal assistance and services for homeless individuals.

Education:

- LINKS-eligible young adults who aged out of the foster care system at age 18 or who were adopted from foster care after their 16th birthday are eligible for up to \$5000 Education Training Vouchers to help pay for post-secondary education or vocational school. The state LINKS coordinator, along with representatives from the LINKS Advisory Committee, will work with residential colleges in North Carolina to provide a more sensitive environment for students from the foster care system. We want to encourage colleges to allow the same considerations for foster youth as for foreign students by allowing students to remain on campus during holiday breaks if they are unable to go home. We also plan to work through the Orphan Foundation and through the SaySo organization to set up a means to network foster youth at the same college, to help them connect and provide emotional support to each other.
- Almost all young adults who age out of foster care are eligible for Pell Grants, which more than pay for community college, and the Education Training Voucher Funds will pay a significant amount toward costs of attendance at public universities.
- LINKS Scholarship funds and Trust Funds are also used to assist young adults to attend college.

Helping youth prepare for and enter post-secondary training and education institutions

Two of North Carolina's outcome goals for youth exiting the LINKS program are that youth leaving foster care will have sufficient income to support themselves and that they will achieve academic and/or vocational training that is in keeping with their interests and abilities.

- Many youth in foster care have gaps in their academic skills due to their traumatic backgrounds and experiences in foster care. LINKS Scholarship and High Risk funds are available to help struggling students to catch up, both through incentives to improve and through purchase of remedial tutoring services. We are gratified by the results of investing funds in these youths' futures. While we cannot purchase many months of intensive tutoring, youth are making sufficient progress to pass their coursework and to accept their abilities. The Division plans to submit a proposal to the NC Legislature in 2005 that will allow us to draw down unspent Chafee Funds which could be placed in a Trust fund to benefit struggling secondary students.

- Secondary school students will be encouraged to consider college or vocational training and will be exposed to community college and four year educational institutions, as well as vocational training schools. Counties will be strongly encouraged to include college or vocational school tours in their LINKS programming, supplemented by “virtual tour” links through web sites such as the College Foundation of North Carolina and the ETV web site. LINKS coordinators will assure that youth are aware of scholarships and grants for which they are eligible.

Provide financial support, housing, counseling, employment, education and other appropriate services to former foster care recipients between 18 and 21 years of age, including youth who were court involved or were in mental health facilities.

- Former foster care recipients between the ages of 18 and 21 and who did not age out of foster care comprise a growing number of service recipients. Counties have the option of serving these young adults, but are strongly encouraged to do so. While the county program allocation can be used to pay for worker service time and LINKS Special Funds are available for eligible expenditures on behalf of these young adults, funding to serve these individuals is inadequate. Program allocations are based on the countable populations, youth 13-15, youth 16 to 18 and young adults who aged out of care. Despite fiscal constraints, a recent county survey indicated that more than half of the counties are currently providing LINKS services to young adults who did not age out of foster care.
- All young adults who aged out of foster care are eligible for a variety of resources and LINKS services until they are 21, and agencies are required to make diligent and persistent efforts to locate them and to determine with them what they need. While youth that were incarcerated on their eighteenth birthday do not qualify for transitional housing expenses, they do qualify for all other funding and resources to address needs related to counseling, employment, education and other appropriate services.

Funding for non-housing expenses

- The LINKS Special Funds, which include the Trust Fund, are available to help with living expenses other than rent or rent deposits. Trust funds are typically used for furniture, utility deposits, and other household-related expenses other than rent and rent deposits.

Use of voluntary placement agreements

- Contractual Agreements for Residential Services (CARS) are voluntary placement agreements between young adults and County Departments of Social Services. Both parties have the right to enter into the agreement or not, or to end the agreement. CARS agreements are available to young adults ages 18-21 who were discharged from care as teens and who now are requesting assistance with their living expenses while they attend school full time. Most participating young adults aged out of care at age 18, but 19% of the counties have extended this option to young adults who tried to make it on their own and realized they needed to further their education with DSS assistance. There continue to be a handful of counties that

do not offer CARS agreements. We hope with encouragement and education they will provide this option.

Service to all political subdivisions:

North Carolina has a state-supervised, county administered system of social service delivery. Each of North Carolina's 100 counties is provided with the information and resources needed to operate the LINKS program for eligible youth and young adults.

1. Counties are required to submit annual plans for their LINKS program. The plan outlines the required and recommended services. The agency director, services supervisor and LINKS liaison sign the plans assuring that Federal requirements will be met. These plans must be submitted and approved for counties to receive any funding through the Chafee program. The LINKS Advisory group will be working to develop standards for basic LINKS programming to assure that counties understand their minimum responsibilities for providing consistent services.
2. County program funding is based on an allocation formula that reflects the number of eligible youth and young adults who are in agency custody as well as young adults who aged out of care and are not yet 21 years of age. Funds are provided to offset the cost of worker time for programs that have 9 or more youth and young adults in the mandated service populations.
3. County spending will continue to be monitored by the state LINKS coordinator as one indicator of whether or not services are being provided. In addition, concerns expressed by the county's youth through SaySo, through other workers seeking services for youth who moved out of county, and through the biennial child and family service reviews will prompt on-site reviews of county performance and regional trainings for groups of under-performing counties.
4. Each month the state coordinator hosts a 90-minute dial-in conference call for interested LINKS liaisons to discuss program ideas and concerns from the field. These calls will be continued.
5. The state coordinator maintains a list of email contacts with the LINKS liaisons from each county. Emails are used to update policy and procedure, to inform staff of new resources, and to share practice ideas. This list will be maintained to assure that it is as current as possible.
6. The LINKS Advisory committee has recommended that the state explore alternate means of providing services through the LINKS program in less populated areas to assure that youth in all areas receive basic services.

Involvement of public and private sectors

The North Carolina plan for Chafee Services 2004-09 was developed with the significant assistance of the LINKS Advisory Committee. This group has been meeting since October 2003 to evaluate and redesign the program plan and includes broad representation from public and private providers as well as youth leaders.

Stakeholders involved in development of the 2004-2009 state Chafee plan include:

- Three youth and young adults from the foster care system, representing SaySo
- County LINKS liaisons from seven county Departments of Social Services
- The North Carolina Foster Parent Association
- The Department of Public Instruction
- Four private child care providers representing the Children and Family Services Association of North Carolina
- The North Carolina Department of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Substance Abuse Services
- The Youth Advocacy and Involvement Office
- The DSS representative to the System of Care collaborative
- DHHS Coalition to Eliminate Homelessness
- Haven House Transitional Living Program
- North Carolina Commission on Indian Affairs
- Division of Employment and Training, Dept of Commerce
- Independent Living Resources/SaySo
- The state coordinator, NC LINKS, Division of Social Services

SaySo, the youth advisory board, is kept abreast of changes in policy and provides valuable input through the LINKS Coordinator, who serves as an adult advisor to the SaySo Board of Directors.

1. Coordination with other Federal/State Programs

✓ **Juvenile Justice Transitional Living programs**

The division has contacted the Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and has asked that a contact be identified to work with the LINKS program. This person will be asked to work with the ongoing LINKS Advisory Committee to assure that mutual clients receive appropriate wraparound services.

✓ **Abstinence programs**

The Department of Health and the Women's Health Section is working with the LINKS advisory committee to help define consistent programmatic elements that can help to combat the high rates of pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease among former foster youth. While the state statistics do show a decrease in pregnancy rates, the rates among current and former foster youth remains unacceptably high at over 19%. Abstinence will be a cornerstone of the program, and will be combined with accurate health information. The Advisory committee will be exploring effective existing curricula and programs to modify or adopt for the North Carolina program.

✓ **Department of Instruction**

The Department of Public Instruction representative is providing informational resources to help us address some of the systemic barriers to educational excellence, including information on state and federal requirements of the local school systems. Recommendations from the advisory committee are being forwarded to DPI to attempt to influence policy that impacts our youth.

- ✓ **Local Housing**
County LINKS liaisons are kept informed of the laws governing public and supported housing programs. The LINKS coordinator serves on a statewide task force to end homelessness in North Carolina and is, therefore, kept up to date on housing resources and changes in these laws as they pertain to foster youth.
- ✓ **Programs for disabled youth**
The statewide survey is used to determine the percentage of youth in care who have disabilities that require different types of programming for youth. The survey identified 3% of the eligible LINKS population who need would benefit from specialized independent living services. We are aware of some curricula and teaching approaches that could be used by local programs and will explore this further.
- ✓ **School to work programs**
County LINKS liaisons work closely with the school to work programs. In addition, the programs offered through the Workforce Investment Act have become excellent partners in helping youth from the foster care system to get the training and supports needed to find and maintain employment.
- ✓ **Consultation with each Indian Tribe**
A staff member from the Commission on Indian Affairs has participated in the LINKS advisory committee and has provided information on tribal events and meetings. The State LINKS Coordinator, along with other DSS staff, will ask for time on an upcoming quarterly meeting of the tribes to hear their concerns about DSS services to children, and will ask that the tribes identify their tribal youth who are in DSS custody. This will help us to update our database as well as to get an accurate picture of the needs of tribal members statewide for Children's Services.

Medicaid:

North Carolina did not take the option to include former foster youth who aged out of care as a covered class of individuals. The Medicaid budget is undergoing severe reductions and we believe that it would be fruitless and perhaps counterproductive to introduce such an amendment at this time. A few young adults qualify under other existing categories such as disability or low income, and young adults who remain in care on a voluntary placement agreement (CARS) remain eligible for Medicaid.

Eligibility Criteria

Eligibility for LINKS services is very broad. The current LINKS Advisory committee recommends that eligibility remain as it has been: all youth who are or were in foster care as teens are eligible for services that use LINKS funds if they are 1) between the ages of 13 and 21; 2) are US citizens or qualified aliens, and 3) do not have access to personal resources in excess of \$10,000. Youth in foster care who do not qualify for expenditure of LINKS funds may receive services anyway so long as no additional funds are required or additional costs are paid through non-Federal sources.

2. Public comments

The North Carolina Chafee State Plan will be posted on the internet for thirty days. Public comment will be incorporated prior to submission of the plan.

Other concerns

Youth who were placed in Level III and Level IV mental health facilities as children but who do not qualify for dependent mental health care as adults are a source of great concern. The LINKS Advisory Committee will work with the state coordinator and the Department of Mental Health to work toward developing standards of independent living services for these teens. Youth who exit these facilities at age 18 are often at a significant disadvantage because of the lack of opportunity to learn even basic self-governing skills.

The ACYF interpretation that Chafee Funds cannot be used to train staff and foster parents is a great concern. While our state does use IV-E funding as well as other federal and state sources to provide training to foster parents and to social workers, it is not sufficient to meet the specific needs of those serving this particular population. The law does say that states must certify that IV-E training funds are used to train foster parents and social workers, but we contend that Chafee funds should be allowable to supplement that training to meet the specific purposes of the Act.